SPECIAL OPS CEs Respond Quickly to Haiti Earthquak

1Lt Dan Wilcoxen
1 SOCES/CEC

To use a cliché, January 13 started out like a normal Wednesday. I was on my way to work at the 1st Special Operations Civil Engineer Squadron (SOCES) at Hurlburt Field, Fla., and looking forward to a short work week after completing a seven-day operational readiness exercise the day before. I listened to initial reports of the earthquake that had severely affected almost three million Haitians the day before and wondered if the 1st Special Operations Wing and our squadron would have any involvement. At 1100L my commander, Lt Col Shawn Moore, notified me that our "J" team was going to Haiti, and by 1400L, my team and I were assembled and ready to fly.

Based on my deployment code as an enabler of special operation forces, while with the 1 SOCES I am assigned as the officer-in-charge of a 24/7/365 on-call eight-person "J" team that performs small footprint rapid beddown with a Hurlburt Field/AFSOC civil engineer-unique Air Rapid Response Kit (ARRK) UTC in support of small unit operations (see sidebar on the ARRK).

By 1900L on January 12, the day of the earthquake, special tactics personnel from Hurlburt Field and Pope AFB, N.C., were already on the ground at Port au Prince Haiti and had secured the damaged Toussaint L'Ouverture International Airport and airfield, establishing tactical air traffic control (ATC) within 28 minutes. Since the quake had rendered the ATC tower useless, the airport was reduced to a concrete strip with a single mid-field taxiway.

My team and I arrived early on January 14 in Port au Prince by HC-130 Talon to find a nearly empty airport, with the exception of one C-17 and a handful of civilian helicopters. Meeting quickly with my immediate commander, Col Buck Elton, and the special tactics team, I was asked to scour the airport and secure a suitable, structurally safe location to construct an expedient Joint Operations Center (JOC) and prepare for incoming SOCSOUTH command and control (C2) elements. We secured the largest warehouse, located on the far west end of the ramp. It had a relatively flat 200-square yard grassed area suitable for expedient beddown, but no commercial power.

After moving our initial airlifted ARRK package via the only 10KAT forklift on the airfield (from Hurlburt), my team built our beddown in a couple hours while the tactical communications team led by Capt Dave Stevenson began setting up the JOC inside the warehouse. Within 24 hours, our C2 node would become the center of controlling all Haiti ATC; airfield security; rescue; critical care evacuation;

special operations forces (SOF)surgical teams; aerial port duties; humanitarian airdrop surveys, planning, and control; rotary wing ops; communications; and logistics.

Over the next three days, we received two additional ARRK packages, with seven more 35KW Atlas generators and 21 environmental control units, increasing our footprint to 21 ARRK shelters and 5 additional GP-medium tents (16'x32') to accommodate a total of over 280 SOUTHCOM, SOCSOUTH, and AFSOC personnel. At the airport, 16 ARRK shelters were used as billeting, two as the first medical facility (staffed by SOF medics), one as the only shower facility for the first two weeks, one as an air-conditioned supply tent (later our J1 area), and another as a shade for American citizens awaiting airlift.

On days 5 and 6 post-arrival, I served in a more formal role as the J7 Civil Engineering Director, as our organization formed into a Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC) under the Joint Task Force commanded by Army Lt Gen Ken Keene, deputy military commander for USSOUTHCOM. My duties changed to that of a pre-ADVON engineer, as officers from an Air Force contingency response group out of JB McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., the 2d Brigade Combat Team from the Army 82d Airborne Division, and later those from the 24th Air Expeditionary Group (AEG) out of Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., came to our JOC to gain any information and assistance on the overall airfield land use and utility situation.

For the first week, the JSOAC was virtually the only organization in country which had communications, food and water, transportation, tents, and security. We became the focal point for the evacuation of 12,000 American citizens and the primary casualty evacuation center coordinating hundreds of evacuation flights. For 12 days, 24/7, Air Force Special Tactics Combat Controllers with tactical radios controlled a total of almost 1,700 fixed wing flights and 800 rotary wing flights from a card table in the grass next to the runway, without a single incident. An FAA ATC mobile tower finally arrived and Air Force ATC personnel were given "the baton."

The JSOAC's role began winding down as larger supporting forces arrived and slowly built their capabilities. (see p. 36) At our day 14 on the ground, an AEG force of 48 Guard civil engineers arrived and began constructing a 150-person camp west of our JSOAC camp. With the AEG on the ground, five of our team members went home to much deserved rest, and the two remaining tech sergeants and I worked to hand over our ARRK assets to the AEG. In their downtime during this period TSgts Heath Feuss and Ronald Banks were able to volunteer to help a Canadian search and rescue helicopter crew offload MREs and water 11 miles into the mountains, providing aid to nuns supporting an orphanage.

Before we left, we joined our security teams to go downtown and were finally able to see what our hard work was supporting. The downtown/inner city district of Port au Prince was in ruins, with thousands living and sleeping outside for fear of further building collapses. As we drove through the city, viewing the suffering and devastation I forced myself to focus on the engineering perspective.

Back at Hurlburt, I feel privileged to have had a role in the efforts in Haiti and realize that the people in Air Force Special Operations I've been honored to serve with are like no other.

1Lt Wilcoxen is the deputy chief of the Programs Flight and the Liaison, 1 SOCES, Hurlburt Field, Fla.

Air Rapid Response Kit

ARRK is a rapidly deployable force beddown kit designed to support 100 personnel with billeting, shower/shave and command and control facilities. Each ARRK requires three 463L pallet positions, easily deployable on one C-130 aircraft. One ARRK includes the following equipment: 5 beddown shelters; 1 shower/shave shelter; 1 multi-purpose shelter; 2 contractor-grade commercial generators; 1 3,000-gallon water bladder; 1 Brief Relief latrine system; 1 diesel/JP8 water heater; 1 four-stall shower; and 1 three-basin field sink. Playbook options provide enhanced capability and are available as add-on features: water purification, armory, extreme cold weather, environmental control, enhanced fuel storage, and command and control facility. For more information on ARRK, email afsoc.a7x@afsoc.af.mil.

Mr. Chuck Dewar and Mr. Andrew Wardencki, HQ AFSOC/A7X